

Proven Time Management Principles

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The way you use your time determines everything that happens to you in life. Successful people are excellent time managers. They are very well organized, they plan their work and they work their plan. As a result, they get more done in less time and they enjoy more of the rewards that life has to offer.

Perhaps the greatest single problem that people have today is "time poverty." Most people feel overwhelmed with responsibilities and activities, and the harder they work, the further behind they feel. This sense of being on a never-ending treadmill can cause you to fall into a reactive/response mode. Instead of clearly deciding what you want to do, you continually react to what is happening around you. Pretty soon you lose all sense of control. You feel that your life is running you, rather than you running your life.

Set Priorities.

The first step in managing your time effectively and taking control of your life is setting priorities. High achievers are adept at separating the essential from the non-essential. There are several ways to designate which tasks are the most important. One way is to limit the number, using the process of natural selection to weed out the least important jobs. Another way is to create two lists, tracking everything you have to do but ranking the most important activities. To decide which items demand the highest priority, put each task to a series of questions. Does it have a specific deadline, like April 15th? Is it an order from someone who you can't ignore? Will doing it advance your career? If the task doesn't elicit a definite "yes" it's a safe bet it doesn't deserve top priority.

Establish Goals.

The most important question to ask when ranking your priorities is, "Will doing this help me to reach my goal?" Goal setting is perhaps the most important thing you can do to manage your time more effectively. Your goal must be clear, specific, and it must be in writing where you can see it every day. You must have a detailed plan to accomplish your goal that calls for you take some action towards it every day.

Plan Each Day.

Before you go to bed each night, create a list of things you must do the next day. It's nearly impossible to remember everything that has to be done. Unless you write out a list, you won't sleep as soundly. Your mind will work overtime while it should be resting, reminding you not to forget each of your important tasks. Moreover, putting a task in writing helps you sort out what is really important. Anything not worth writing down is probably not worth doing.

Set Deadlines.

Always commit yourself to completing each task on your list by a specific date and time. The way to make your list more effective is to set aside time to do each task in a planning diary that is broken down into half-hour increments. It is also a good idea to keep a list of your top items on your desk. This way, if you get tied up for hours, you can glance at your list to see if it is something that should be taking up a lot of your time. If you don't have a constant reminder of things you want to get done, they aren't going to get done.

Make Lists.

Making lists is also a powerful tool you can use to manage others. Whenever you delegate responsibilities, make sure that the members of your staff keep lists of the items assigned to them. Then, ask them to bring their lists to meetings to use as a basis of their progress reports.

Organize Your Workspace.

Organizing your time is easier when you organize your workspace. A neat desk helps you stay focused on the task at hand when you need to find something. Think about how mechanics do their work. They line up their tools on trays in an arrangement that allows them to reach for a tool without taking their eyes off their work, and then they put it back in the same place. What is crucial in good time management is that you make your workplace work for you. Make sure that your office matches the flow of your daily activities. By rearranging the placement of your desk, phone, computer, and storage space, you can save thousands of extra steps every year, which can mean big savings in your time.

Eliminate Clutter.

A cluttered desk creates stress and distracts you from giving your full concentration to the job at hand. To keep your desk clear, file everything but the one item you are working on at the moment. Store the files according to whether you need to use them every day, every week, or every month. Keep the items that you frequently use within your reach, perhaps in your desk drawers, and put those things you look at less often in file cabinets and storage boxes. Create a "To Be Filed" folder, as well as one or two "To Do" folders for items requiring immediate or less-urgent attention, and keep them in a place you can readily access. Regularly schedule time for catching up, reorganizing, and working your way through the folders.

Work Within Your Strengths.

To make the best use of your day, concentrate on what you do best. For example, if you are good at writing proposals and that is what you are paid to do, find someone else to do your filing or research. If you're overwhelmed with paperwork to review, considering hiring an intern or a student from a local college. Although this will require an initial investment of time to teach the intern what to do, the time savings in the long run will be well worth it. If you decide to hire someone to lighten your load, choose only the best. Pick people who can accept responsibility, and who have the right skills and interests. Assign priorities and a due date to each task, provide the necessary training, and delegate as much responsibility as possible.

Block Time.

An important part of effective time management is being able to set aside blocks of time when you will not be interrupted. By setting aside blocks of time it will allow you to focus on your work. But setting aside chunks of time isn't easy when you're continuously bombarded by phone calls and personal intrusions. To find time to concentrate, you may need to come to the office before anyone else arrives, or stay after everyone else has left. If your company allows flex-time, take advantage of it. Many people find that coming in a half-hour early gives them time to go through their lists and find tasks that can be accomplished before the phone rings and the crises begin. Finding chunks of time means that you do things when nobody else is doing them. For example, avoid the Friday afternoon crush by cashing checks and shopping when other people are not forming long lines. Use the copier during lunch, while everyone else is out of the office.

Know Your Peak Productivity Hours.

The ability to stay focused plays a major role in saving time. Staying focused means being able to concentrate on one problem without being distracted or growing tired. In order to do this you have to find the time of the day when you work at your peak. All of us have work rhythms, which include certain times when we do better work than at other times of the day. Studies have shown that the biggest surge of energy for most people starts at around 11 a.m. and usually lasts for about two hours. Another high-wave begins about 4 p.m. and lasts until about 6 p.m. To take advantage of high-energy phases you may want to try doing non-creative tasks, like opening letters, filing, or reading the paper, in the early morning, and concentrate on the most mentally demanding work between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m., and from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m.

Understand WHY.

Saving time is nice, but there is a bigger issue to ponder: what you save time for. The answer lies in the priorities that you have set. The "What for?" question should be asked about the life you live, not just for the work you do. Albert Einstein once said that, if he could send just one message to the world, it would be this, "Never forget that the fruits of our work are not final in themselves. Production is meant to make our lives easier, to give our lives a touch of beauty and refinement, but we should not allow ourselves to be degraded into mere slaves of production." While saving time can allow people to work more efficiently, it also gives each person the opportunity to achieve his or her own dreams.